

By WILLIAM KEE
Pictures by ONG SOON HIN

One is tempted to ask from where she acquired this sense of independence, this urge not to conform, to be critical and not just to cheer on those in power. – Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad from his Foreword in Marina Mahathir's book, *In Liberal Doses*

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LIKE father, like daughter? Anyone reading this interesting remark by the Prime Minister about his eldest daughter would certainly be led to think that that is what he intended.

And most people will happily see Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir in her father's mould thanks to her work as an AIDS activist and newspaper columnist. Time and time again, she has proven that she is just as outspoken, critical and strong-willed as her dad, on issues that matter.

Just as any event with Dr Mahathir's attendance is deemed newsworthy, Marina has undoubtedly become one of the most high-profiled women in Malaysia over the past few years.

But then again, she has earned her stripes – and a couple of “controversies” to spice things up.

This year alone, Marina has notched up various honours – from picking up a community service award for her tireless work in AIDS to being conferred the Datin Paduka title by the Sultan of Selangor. She was also appointed the Asia Pacific representative where United Nations policies on AIDS are concerned and in August, was the proud recipient of an honorary Masters degree in Arts from Universiti Sains Malaysia.

And as 1997 draws to a close, she chalks up another noteworthy achievement – a book shrewdly titled *In Liberal Doses* that contains her best writings from her fortnightly column, *Musings, in Section 2* which was launched yesterday in Kuala Lumpur. Certainly, Marina – always blunt and unabashedly liberal with her opinions – is no stranger to attention.

The world according to Marina

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what more a **book**.

“On Tuesday nights, I worry about it because you're putting across a position and it's there in black and white. So it is very easy for someone to refer to it and attack you; you have to be ready to defend yourself.”

In the book, the articles have been divided and compiled according to their topics. All together there are seven chapters, all of which have an introduction by Marina: **On Being Malaysian, Marina Vs the Censors, Malaysia's Social Values, A Malaysian Looks At the World, Talking to Young People, Women in Malaysia and AIDS.**

The result, she feels, are points and arguments raised which are much stronger.

When Marina started out writing **Musings**, she says it was with little expectations. As she states in the introduction to Chapter Five: “The original idea was for me to write about family and home.”

From mainly domestic concerns, however, the column very soon had bits of biting sarcasm directed at dubious policies proposed by government officials in the country and global concerns such as AIDS and women's rights.

Marina terms the growth of topics tackled by **Musings** as a natural progress. “It's grown and evolved by itself based on the things that interested me,” she says, adding that from early 1992, she was going through a lot of changes in her life.

This included accepting the challenging position as chairman of the Malaysian AIDS Foundation in 1993. The following year, she was elected as president of the Malaysian AIDS Council.

That was when, as Marina explains: “My scope of interest in current issues expanded . . . which in turn enriched the column.”

“But also, I use my experiences with my daughter or through her to reflect on larger concerns. I have always used little incidences as a lead-in to talk about larger things.”

Where rewards from having a column are concerned, Marina affirms that there are indeed many

“Personally, there's been that discipli-

She started writing *Musings* in late 1991 and it wasn't long before her column developed a mind of its own, daring to express strong and often controversial views on many important issues and events affecting the Malaysian body politic.

Her honest and sometimes passionate views have, as the *Asian Wall Street Journal* aptly described, "won her many kudos and a few darts."

A perfect example of this was her recent no-holds barred article which criticised relevant religious authorities on arresting three Muslim beauty contestants. "It was such a tough thing," recalls Marina on writing *Religion, where is thy beauty?* (July 9, 1997), which she deems as her most controversial column, ever. "Sometimes, you get the feeling that you're the only person in the world to feel this way."

She wasn't. The almost immediate response to that article was the best she ever had. "I had people calling, faxing, e-mailing, writing, stopping me in the streets and 98% were supportive. They spanned all races and ages."

The two per cent that disagreed with her views, adds Marina, wrote to the newspapers, but not to her directly.

This interview, held a couple of weeks before the launch, is to talk about the book (naturally) and the column.

We meet at her modest but cosy office, tucked within an old colonial shoplot on Jalan Pudu Lama, KL. which has lots of wood furnishings and bamboo plants to add to its Old World charm. This is where

Marina joins others in preparing to launch floating candles to sea in memory of AIDS victims on AIDS Memorial Day this year. TOP: Marina ... 'we always have to keep a sense of humour as it gives us a sense of perspective.'

Marina runs a publishing house.

Dressed in a fetching long-sleeved top and form-fitting pants, Marina, who turned 40 this year, looks quite relaxed and sportingly goes along with a lengthy photo shoot before the interview, never once making a fuss.

When we finally begin the interview, I start the ball rolling with "safe questions" mainly about how she feels since the book

has now become a reality.

(I was more than relieved that I took the safe route, for later, I found out that Marina had actually thrown out a reporter for starting out on the wrong track. But more on that later.)

"Well, I am very excited and also very nervous," she says. But then, she's nervous every time the column comes out (fortnightly, on Wednesdays) anyway.

nary reward, being able to express what I feel about things. Having a column disciplines you to try and think very clearly (about a certain topic) and clarify it in your mind.

"It's so easy to keep something in your head and toss it and turn it all the time without really coming to some sort of concrete idea, but when you write a column, you have to do it."

Even more valuable for Marina, however, was finding out that "somehow, I have been able to express things which a lot of people are thinking."

"It's not that I go out and ask people what they think; I only write on a personal basis. And then I find to my surprise that it resonates a lot of people.

"People read this (my column) and nod to themselves and I didn't know this until I go out and they come up to me to voice their approval. I have a rather short memory but there are actually people who can quote from certain col-

umns.

"In a way," she continues, "I feel good as people sort of think of me as special but somehow I am every person."

With her high profile, not surprisingly, she attracts constant stares whenever she goes out.

"Sometimes you do feel like you're being watched all the time ... when I am in the supermarket in a T-shirt and jeans, I sort of wonder whether they're disappointed. This is what Marina looks like on weekends ... like normal people, you know."

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Then she brightens up and shares a funny anecdote. "I guess you'll do the same thing if you ever meet somebody well-known . . . you look out for what's normal about them.

"For instance, I met Iman (former supermodel and wife of rock star David Bowie) in Singapore last month. Afterwards, I was in the Ladies with other women and you know what everyone was pleased about? She (Iman) has a tummy!"

It was unexpected instances like this throughout the interview that demonstrates Marina's flair for wit and humour – the same qualities often lacing her articles, despite the sometimes hard-hitting issues.

When asked how she manages to keep her sense of humour intact although she may be hopping mad while writing her latest critique, she says: "I think humour is the greatest medicine, as they say and we always have to keep a sense of humour as it gives us a sense of perspective."

One of many examples would be *The Best of Malaysia* (Feb 19, 1997) in which she commented on how in a *season of big-heartedness, there always has to be a spoilsport* (a certain public figure had disagreed with the use of "Kongsi Raya"). She then added: *That's one person who's not going to get a Milo tin of love letters this year.*

Marina laughs when this is brought up.

"That Milo tin just came to me, it's such a standard Malaysian thing. That's what I try to use, everyday icons of Malaysian life. And I think people like it when you bring it up in the most unexpected of places."

Asked how certain quarters she has criticised (sometimes subtly, sometimes harshly, but with no names given, in her column will feel about their "skeletons" being dragged out of the closet again in light of the book's publication, Marina shrugs: "They probably won't like it, they didn't like it the first time. We'll

Doses of wit and humour

considering I am his daughter!" 66

With an incredulous look, she adds: "People come to me, trying to pass things on (to the PM) and I am like: 'Gee? What am I supposed to do with this?'"

As Marina once commented in another press interview: "When I was overseas, people asked me all the time why didn't, I just go and ask my dad to do certain things. I always said because of the way I was brought up, I couldn't because I didn't want to take advantage of my relationship with him."

Well now we've come to the Mahathir name, which is without doubt the most instantly recognisable name in present-day Malaysia.

In almost all the press interviews that Marina has done local and foreign – the fact that she's the Prime Minister's daughter has been brought, up without fail, even after Marina has succeeded in carving an independent image and role in society.

In one report, it was pointed out that where the Mahathir name was concerned, it "has been both a boon and a burden" for Marina.

Has she resigned to the inescapable notion that such questions will always, always be around?

"Well, I can't escape the fact. In the early days, when I first came back (from living abroad), I used to resent it enormously I used to think, 'Wah, is that the most interesting thing about me? which of course, begged

the question: *What is interesting about me?* And at that time, there wasn't really anything.

"Now that I feel I have done enough, by having carved out my own identity, so to speak, I don't mind it too much. Although it *is* still irritating."

Also included in *In Liberal Doses* is the now famous *Whither Justice?* piece which Marina once admitted was her “most notorious column.” She apparently wrote it in 20 minutes as she was so mad.

That article was carried on the front page of *Section 2* on Nov 9, 1994, and expressed very vividly Marina’s anger at the injustices concerning the under-aged girl allegedly involved with several men, including a former chief minister.

She wrote: *Z don’t care what the fifteen-year-old Melaka girl is like but the fact remains she is underage. It seems to me to be a gross mockery of justice that she is the one being charged for illicit sex. Z can tell already what is going to happen when the eight men who admitted they have slept with her get to court (if they are ever going to get there at all). They’ll all whine and say “She made me do it.”*

... As a woman, especially a Muslim woman, I am angry, disgusted and ashamed. Z have always thought that one of the foundations of my religion was justice. Zt cannot be subsumed to worldly things like politics.

Asked *why* she chose to pursue the controversial instead of sticking to the safe territory of talking about family matters, she says: “I would have found it limiting. I am NOT like that, you know!”

“I think everything that I’ve done, I have always expanded on it. To me, it was a natural thing to expand the scope of the column. Nobody objected to it. You are always looking for something new to say anyway...”

What does she think is the biggest misconception that people have of her?

A pause, then Marina replies sombrely: “That I have complete access to my dad and that I know everything that is going

on within the Government and politics. Very often, I am the last person to know.

“I knew my dad was going on a two-month holiday two days before he announced it. You know, that’s pretty bad,

This mindset that we should try and get things as easily as possible is very strange to me. It’s just not in our family values to get things easily... It’s been instilled in us by our parents that nothing comes easy in life, you have to work for whatever you want. There’re absolutely no shortcuts.

As if to prove her point, Marina recalls how she once kicked out a reporter for starting out by asking her what it is like to be the PM’s daughter.

“I don’t mind if it (the question) is inserted somewhere, but if you start out that way, it means that you haven’t done any research on me. I just threw him out. I just wasn’t in the mood for it.”

Summing up her feelings about the topic with a wry smile, she sighs, in mock helplessness: “But yeah well, what to do?”

And then her mischievous streak kicks in: “Although I am dying, I am dying, okay, for somebody to go up to my dad and ask what is it like to be Marina’s dad? Nobody has ever asked him that in any interview and they should. It would be so interesting just, to turn the tables around.”

As a result of her family name, says Marina, the public sometimes have unrealistic perceptions and expectations when they meet her.

“It’s all surface . . . sometimes it’s nice when people just get (to see) the surface, you can hide your real self and feel you are sort of free. Sometimes you can get really resentful also, because you know that people’s impression of you is completely different from what you are.

“I keep meeting people when I go around giving talks and they’ll say: ‘You are so normal.’ And I am like: Yes? Anddd...? What *did* you expect?”

It, is interesting to note that while Marina’s face is almost, as famous as her parents’ her three brothers’ “fame quotient” is pretty low, despite, their being successful businessmen.

Asked if her siblings ever tease her about getting the lion’s share of the lime-light, she replies candidly: “No, I think they are resentful. . . they think I do all this to make them look bad! That’s what one of them told one of my friends.”

Then with a wicked little laugh: “Well, I think it makes them look good; they can

bask in the reflected glory.”

“The one thing that my brothers and I get resentful about is the whole idea that ‘Of course *lah*, they get all this, they are PM’s children’ but they never see the backroom work, how we really worked at everything.

“This mindset that we should try and get things as easily as possible is very strange to me. It’s just not in our family values to get things easily. Everything has to be worked for.”

Those family values are what Marina now strives to pass on to her 10-year-old daughter, Ineza. “It’s been instilled in us by our parents that nothing comes easy in life, you have to work for whatever you want.. There’re absolutely no shortcuts.

“My dad used to laugh at us if we entered competitions as he thought, we were trying to find a shortcut. And of course, we never won which seemed to prove his point.”

Other values that Marina hopes to instill in Ineza are not surprising: “A commitment to truth, and a commitment to seeing justice done.”

Those who know Marina speak very highly of her good manners and thoughtfulness. For instance, friends who attended a surprise birthday party thrown for her, received handwritten thank-you notes from her.

She responds: “I am a maniac about manners, especially among young children (which she has touched on in her column as well).

“My parents were particular about a lot of things and I think they’ve always brought us up with the right values, even though some people think of us as incredibly liberal and westernised. But the values were always there, very solid.”

On getting her dad to contribute the foreword to the book, she says she asked him, “partly because I felt I had to, in case he got upset that I didn’t.”

Nevertheless, Marina was quite surprised when he agreed. However, he burst her bubble by requesting for some of her columns so that he could read them

“I was quite upset I was like: You mean, you don’t read me-ah?” says Marina, feigning anger

“I then said to him: Look, I don’t want you to write a foreword like one would

for a souvenir programme. I want you to write a personal column of your own, about writing columns since you used to write one in your younger days.”

And that’s what he did precisely.

“It’s turned out to be quite an interesting essay,” says a very pleased Marina. “In fact, I am afraid it is going to overshadow mine. Everyone will read that and analyse it line by line and forget about my stuff?”

Marina started her working life as a journalist. She’s also dabbled in promotions and public relations and fashion.

Her extensive publishing and Journalism experiences include working with *Paris Vogue* and as a consultant, to *Newsweek* and the *International Herald Tribune*, and publishing a handful of coffee table books such as *Malaysia: Heart of Southeast Asia*, *Grafts of Malaysia*, *Passage to Vietnam*, and perhaps the most ambitious of all, the forthcoming multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Malaysia*.

She was educated at Sussex University in Britain, where she completed a degree in international relations. She has lived in Japan and Los Angeles.

Marina married and divorced a Frenchman, who still lives in Malaysia. As a single mother, Marina has written several pieces on her triumphs and tribulations in bringing up a daughter in the 90s.

For all the confidence that she exudes in appearance, Marina has often portrayed herself as a mother with very common problems in her column, coping with ups and downs that ordinary mothers could identify with.

We touch very delicately on how Ineza handles the “single mother” situation.

“Initially, she was a bit confused but I cleared it up with her. It’s important to be truthful when you explain. And she’s an incredibly mature and independent child for her age. She knows that we love her so that’s the main thing. I try and keep routines the same. The important thing is for the child to feel secure.

“She & Ineza sees her father on weekends so it’s not a problem.” adds Marina.

Marina agrees that people have associated her so closely as an outspoken columnist, an AIDS activist and a mother that

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they often forget that she also holds a fulltime job heading a publishing house. How on earth does she manage all these tasks?

"The balancing out of my time between all these activities is not very well done, quite frankly. It's been a struggle to adjust my priorities," she says.

"Mainly, I worry about the time that is being lost on my daughter. During the school holidays last year, I was working most of the time, so now I try and institute rules about what I will and won't do. I say I won't work on weekends (but) it hasn't worked that well, unfortunately."

Marina's commitment to the AIDS cause is nothing short of exceptional. She once described her involvement with AIDS as "a lifetime commitment."

"I think everyone who gets into AIDS work finds it hard to get out of it, no matter how burned out you get. Because basically, you're dealing with human lives.

"The principal motivation is that you want to save lives. You know that this virus is moving faster than you are, so that's what I mean by it being a lifetime commitment - I don't think I'd ever get out of it. Unless they find a cure for it and the whole problem is solved, I don't see an end to it."

But as Marina quickly points out, she is determined not to let the AIDS cause run like "a cult of personality" fuelled only by her celebrity status.

"What I've worked very hard for is to set up a structure for the Malaysian AIDS Council to make sure that its foundations are solid, so it should be able to carry on no matter who is the president.

In the introduction to the book chapter solely dedicated to AIDS, Marina writes that she got involved with it "quite by accident" and that she had lost two friends, William and Siti, to AIDS.

"It's not as if I woke up one day and decided I'd take up a cause, it just happened," she explains. "It was an accident in that, I was asked to join the Malaysian AIDS Foundation as they did not have enough women on the board and at that time, they had no idea what I could do. All they knew was that I had experience in raising funds."

And raise funds she did. The first big charity event that Marina organised to

benefit the MAF was a dinner and fashion show featuring the works of Vivienne Westwood in April 1994, which pulled in half a million ringgit.

The intangible rewards for Marina are plenty too.

"I've met some wonderful people and I feel really privileged working with people living with HIV and AIDS because I've been witness to incredible compassion, incredible love and incredible strength which you don't see if you're always with people who are having it good in life.

"You realise how privileged and lucky you are and how much you should be doing to give something back. And that to me is the greatest reward of all."

The most frustrating hindrance for Marina where AIDS is concerned, she says is "a real lack of will to protect our people from HIV."

"I don't think we are doing enough don't, think people here really understand the magnitude of the epidemic. And therefore, we are not responding in kind. There is a real lack of a will to deal with reality in this country and that's very sad. We are going to pay for it in the end...."

Going back to her column, I ask Marina how long she sees herself writing Musings. "I suppose until they (the editors) fire me" she jokes.

"I don't plan ahead. I respond to what's happening around us. I try to keep it topical at most times, and I try to bring in a new take on what's current."

Furthermore, she pointedly adds: "There is no lack of issues in Malaysia."

When I attempt to inquire where matters of the heart lie within her hectic lifestyle, Marina laughingly says, "No comment" and then adds tantalisingly, "for the moment."

Finally, where does she hope to see herself in 10 years?

A thoughtful pause before she says: "I hope to have at least one more child and I hope to remain on very close terms with my friends and family. That's basically all.

"Everything else that comes my way is a bonus."

■ *In Liberal Doses* is available in both hardcover (RM59.90) and paperback (RM24.90) from all leading bookstores

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